Lost children and imaginary mothers in Sonya Harnett's *Of A Boy*

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes about lost children.[1] These are what she calls 'dejects', [2] who, in the psychodrama of subject formation, fail to fully absent the body of the mother, to accept the Law of the Father and the Symbolic, and subsequently to establish 'clear boundaries which constitute the object-world for normal subjects'.[3] Dejects are 'strays' looking for a place to belong, a place that is bound up with the Imaginary mother of the pre-Oedipal period. Kristeva's sketch of the deject as one who is unable to negotiate a proper path to the Symbolic is useful to a reading of Hartnett's *Of A Boy* (2002)[4], a novel that also deals with lost children and imaginary mothers. However in its portrayal of children who are doomed to never achieve adulthood, *Of A Boy* enacts a haunting retrieval of the pre-Oedipal from the dark side of phallocentric representation, privileging the semiotic (Kristeva's concept) and the maternal as necessary disruptive checks on a patriarchal Symbolic Order. In reading the narrative in this way, this essay does not seek to foreclose on other interpretations which may more fully illuminate the material and historical contexts in which Hartnett's stories of abandoned and lost mothers and children are activated. Rather by examining the text using an aspect of psychoanalytic literary criticism, this essay acknowledges the centrality of the psycho-social to Harnett's delineation of the child subject in her narrative projects.[5]

Of a Boy is set in 1977, a year in which, among other things on the global scene, 'Queen Elizabeth celebrated her Silver Jubilee…and US President Carter officially pardoned those who'd draft-dodged the Vietnam War'. [6] Against these weighty socio-political events indexing both tradition and change in the global context, is counterpoised a much smaller, more local event; 1977 is also the year in which Veronica, Zoe and Christopher Metford, three children from an ordinary middle-class Australian suburb, walk to the local store for an ice-cream treat promised by their mother and are never seen again.[7] The story of the lost Metford children is the event with which Hartnett begins her tale, and one which evocatively converses with the main narrative of nine-year old Adrian, another 'lost' child, who lives with his grandmother Beattie and her 25 year old son Rory (Adrian's uncle). Adrian, we are informed in compressed and sporadic moments as the narrative unravels, has lived for the first few years of his life with his mother Sookie and his father, followed by brief periods firstly with his mother then with his father after his parents separate. Finally after Adrian's father declares that Sookie is not a fit mother (she suffers from an undisclosed illness which we are led to believe is depression fuelled by alcohol), his father delivers him to Beattie, Sookie's mother, with the dismissive words: 'I can't take care of him and that's all there is to it. I need to be free'. [8]

While these background details are only skimpily etched, they define a hegemonic patriarchal social order founded for its stability on the 'good', protective and acquiescent mother, and the authoritative and dominant father. In this schema, women are essentially linked with the nurturing and domestic domain and men with the outside world of work and self-management. Middle-class suburbia is also implicated in this patriarchally gendered division of labour, spatiality and parenting. Duruz refers to the 'feminization of the suburbs' that accompanied suburban expansion following World War 11 in which 'ideologically at least, house, garden, woman and children' constituted a comforting

'emotional centre'.[9] Central to this script is the promise of successful rites of passage to self-definition, and an endorsement of the oedipal psychodrama of identity formation. This patterning of family life was prevalent in 1970's Australia; Hartnett's dialogue with it in *Of A Boy*, probes beneath the façade to reveal more disquieting family formations: marriages fall apart, sons cannot grow up, mothers fail to 'mother', children disappear or are disappointments, and grandmothers become 'grand-monsters' (Adrian's private name for his grandmother Beattie). The home and the suburban space are represented either as dark and desolate places or as sites cluttered with compensatory material objects. While Hartnett's novel burrows beneath the family suburban dream, it also discloses, through Adrian's heavy emotional investment in it, the ways in which it exacts a heavy emotional toll, particularly on mothers and children.

Kristeva's portrait of the deject provides an instructive liminal position from which to grasp the processes by which some individuals struggle and fail to negotiate a subject position within a given social and Symbolic Order. Kristeva's concept is indebted to Lacan's contention that the process of becoming a 'normal' subject involves the father figure splitting the dyadic unity between mother and child (the Imaginary of the pre-Oedipal period) and providing access to a place within the Symbolic Order. In his use of the term Symbolic, Lacan recognizes the significance played by the language systems, ideology, the law, intersubjective relations and the social and moral conventions in any given society. In entering the Symbolic Order, the child becomes subject to its rules, regulations, and linguistic templates and is thus enabled to transact with others. Lacan also recognizes that this process is never fully complete because it comes at a cost to the child, and that is the repression of its sense of wholeness with the mother experienced in the womb and in the Imaginary stage. Moi, explicating Lacan on this point writes:

> The Law of the Father (or the threat of castration), thus come to signify separation and loss of the maternal body, and from now on the desire for the mother or the imaginary unity with her must be repressed. This first repression is what Lacan calls the primary repression and it is this primary repression that opens up the unconscious…the speaking subject only comes into existence because of the repression of the desire for the lost mother. [10]

Kristeva's description of the deject identifies a modality in which the child fails to fully repress the desire for the 'lost mother'. The deject therefore resides at the interstitial level between the subconscious and unconscious realms in the motivational drives towards identity formation; in this respect the deject complicates the ordered certainties of the Symbolic and performs in much the same way Kristeva claims the semiotic and the abject do, that is as disruptive accompaniments to the Symbolic.[11] Kristeva argues that while the separation from the maternal body is necessary for the development of individual identity, the mother/child dyadic relationship of the pre-Oedipal period has been dismissed in Freudian and Lacanian theory as having little if any teleological or linguistic value. In her re-working of Freud's and Lacan's oedipal narrative, Kristeva seeks to valorize the pre-Oedipal (encompassed in her term 'semiotic') and to argue for its ongoing dialogue with the symbolic in the negotiation of subjectivity. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva writes:

> The subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. [12]

Kristeva uses the word 'semiotic' in order to acknowledge the existence of a pre-verbal language in the relationship between the mother and child in the pre-Oedipal period. The deject lives in a state of uncertainty, unable to ratify the primary repression that would vouchsafe a secure place in the Symbolic Order, and constantly experiencing the fear of 'his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother'.[13] However, to read Adrian as deject, a captive of the semiotic, is not necessarily to condemn him to the prison-house of psychosis, rather it is to come to understand that the Symbolic Order is, in many ways, an inadequate substitute for the imaginary unity with the mother. It is this particular condition that Hartnett's novel can be read as redeeming and privileging.

Hartnett's reiterative use of opaque images in her psychological rendering of Adrian's perspective references his inability to purchase a concrete concept of the self in the familial and societal contexts in which he resides. Like the deject he is held in a kind of suspended animation, peering anxiously from the metaphoric womb which is both an abyss that threatens to collapse all meaning and a safe place in strong opposition to a world which denies him a secure identity: 'Everyone and everything exists in a world he cannot quite comprehend. He glimpses only the residue, scrapes the surface of happenings. He wonders if, when he's older, he will better understand things, or if he is doomed to live forever as someone struggling to see'.[14] Harnett makes it clear that Adrian's shaky self-image, his struggle to see, is induced in large part by the way others in the phallocentric Symbolic have seen him. In particular he has overheard his father telling his grandmother he should not give her any trouble because he (Adrian) is tame and uninteresting. The passage denotes the ways in which the subject is (literally and symbolically) labelled by the Law of the Father, [15] and the ways in which this classification is internalized by the emergent subject:

> His father thought him boring. A thing to be rid of……He has spent what seems like his entire life being driven from person to person and place to place. Like the bundle that gets handed about in the game of pass-the-parcel, he's been unwrapped and made smaller as he's pushed from each to the next. He is haunted by the prospect of losing the last thin layer that protects him.[16]

Hartnett's description of Adrian as a 'bundle' is highly evocative of the child in the womb while the reference to the 'last thin layer that protects him' suggests the penultimate stages of the birthing process. Considered in this way, the passage articulates the ambivalence that denotes the deject-as-possible-subject's relationship with the Symbolic: at once anxious for positive self-affirmation, at the same time reluctant to leave the defensive enclosure of the maternal body. As Adrian's negative experiences in the material world (that is the Symbolic Order) accrue, his desire for the lost maternal realm exponentially intensifies.

The spatial is a component along with the linguistic in the constitution of self-image.[17] When Adrian is rejected by his friend Clinton, he comments to his uncle Rory, "'Everybody leaves me. I'm not allowed to be anywhere.'" [18]This statement echoes Kristeva's claims that the deject, 'Instead of sounding himself as to his 'being', does so concerning his place: "*Where* am I?" instead of "*Who* am I?"' [19] The 'where' rather than 'who' signifies Adrian's apprehension of the adult world and his related inability to gain a substantial sense of place within it. This fear is displaced onto other happenings and objects in his environment. The year in which the events in the narrative take place, a strange sea creature is caught by a Japanese fishing fleet in the Atlantic Ocean. Adrian is haunted by this image; it is another thing to add to the 'list of things he finds disquieting'. [20] Hartnett's description of the sea creature, angled through Adrian's lens, connects the shapelessness and fearfulness of its strangeness with his own self-perceived lack of definition: 'Winglike flippers fold back from its cresting, cavernous body. It seems to possess a tattered rope of tail. The bones show through – sometimes break through – the white and waxy skin. The flesh looks melted, it is a thing in ruins'. [21] Adrian is disappointed when the sea-monster no longer registers on the evening news. His identification with it and the fact that it cannot be defined as something in the known world, symbolizes his fear of being different, of not being a unified self, in control of the cognitive and corporeal boundaries in the way that he perceives others to be; and his desire to find out what the sea-monster actually is, speaks of a deep need to see if he too can be explained and accounted for, to be something solid not 'melted' or a 'thing in ruins'. This identification of the discontinuous self, of the self in layers is a repeated motif in the novel that approximates, according to Lacan, the first sense a baby has of its body when it moves beyond the secure anchorage to the mother within the womb.[22]

Kristeva writes, 'For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.' [23] Amongst other things that Adrian counts in his things to be afraid of are quicksand and spontaneous combustion, both representing his fear of disappearing, a slippage into nothingness, the space of the 'divisible ("unwrapped and made smaller") the foldable (the "bundle"), and the catastrophic ("quicksand")'. The liminal position figured by his fears, is similar to that held by the deject. The local park, usually signified in suburban discourse as a 'happy' and 'safe' place where community can enact itself, is for Adrian a 'forsaken place, a rejected one' in a 'perpetual state of desertedness.'[24] The disappearance of the Metford children also interlinks with Adrian's sense of his own insubstantiality and his strong desire for an acceptable identity. Harnett weaves the disappearance of the children into the narrative fabric of Adrian's story, so that they countersign the tenuousness of identity that characterizes Adrian's state, his fear that there is no secure and protected place for him in the material world. It also signals the ways in which the abject child cannot engage fully with a subject position in the Symbolic: 'It has never occurred to him that children can vanish. The Metfords have not been lost or abandoned-they have been made to disappear…. Adrian has never thought that an ordinary child could be worth taking or wanting, a desirable thing.' [25]

Adrian's inability to establish and maintain the 'proper' borders of individuation is heavily pronounced in his perception of the children at nearby St Jonah's orphanage,

some of whom attend his local school. His friend Clinton has no trouble situating the orphans in opposition to his own securely guarded realm of self-definition, his strong sense of place in the society of home and school. Clinton's grasp of these classifying borders allows him to constitute the orphans as 'other' and 'abnormal'. Explaining them to a bewildered Adrian, Clinton confidently expounds that they are orphans because:

> Their parents are no good, that's why. Can't look after their children. Don't treat them very well. Maybe don't even want them. So the kids get taken away and put in the Home. But it's too late, usually. Some of them have already gone nuts. Nuts from not being looked after properly. Crazy like their mum and dad are.[26]

Clinton's identification of the child who is abject, denotes a Symbolic Order that privileges the 'respectable' and arguably, in the social context of the novel, 'white' middle-class nuclear family.[27] Adrian's reaction to Clinton's description is an apprehensive awareness of the flimsiness of the layer between his own situation and that of the St. Jonah's orphans. He 'knows how close he himself teeters to the abyss of exclusion. Only Clinton stands between him and the searing loneliness Adrian recognizes in the outcasts. He has felt before their aching forlornness for himself.'[28] One of these orphans is Sandra, who is known as 'Horsegirl' for her preferred impersonation of horses. She is marginalised by others at the school who see her as crazy and she is largely left to her own devices, a situation which ironically affords her a short-lived degree of freedom from authority. Adrian's relationship with her exists on a delicate borderline between empathy, fascination, hatred and fear; she represents that which he could become if his own frail sense of self fully disintegrates, her nick-name already implying another collapse of boundary – that between animal and human.[29] When Horsegirl reacts savagely towards a locum teacher who threatens to take away her bridle, Adrian witnesses 'the empty desk in the corner' which denotes the erasure that awaits the borderless deject in a society that demands allegiance to established forms of behaviour and being.[30]

Central to Adrian's insecurity is his deepest fear of not being part of a 'normal' family; he wants a 'calm and rosy world' to be loved and acknowledged; 'To be lost or forgotten or abandoned and alone are, to Adrian, terrors more carnivorous than any midnight monster lurking underneath a bed.'[31] His desire for connection with others and for what he perceives as a 'normal' life is expressed in his tentative understandings of, and relationships with, the material world. Most significantly however his emotional desire for connection becomes increasingly bound up with his own mother and other mother figures in his life. In Lacan's view of the 'normal' processes of subject formation, the child represses the desire for imaginary unity with the maternal into the unconscious, and, with the acquisition of language, articulates his/her difference- the 'I am'.[32] Adrian's yearning for the protective world of the home and his image of the mother figure as a source of nurture and care within its boundaries, underwrite his failure to articulate the 'I am' despite his desperate attempts to do so. Drawing on Lacan, Lye argues that the individual's desire for the state of non-differentiated wholeness experienced in the womb is displaced onto other things (people and objects) which constitute the fetishised impulse and its indexical connection with the lost maternal body. Lye writes:

> Severed from our mother's body, we have to make do instead with substitute objects, what Lacan calls the 'object little a', with which we try vainly to plug the gap at the center of our being. We move among substitutes for substitutes, metaphors for metaphors, never able to recover the pure (if fictive) self-identity and self-completion which we knew in the imaginary.[33]

In Hartnett's novel Adrian's desire for self-completion, intensified through his extreme sense of alienation and a lack of confirmation of self from others, leads him to construct a more enunciated metaphorical relationship with the object world. This is demonstrated on a number of occasions and in a number of ways, all of which feature the mother/child fusion as a key incubator of Adrian's desire. One of the things Adrian values most is a bronze cherub bowl in his grandmother's house; it is what his hand automatically reaches for when he feels threatened or anxious, its solidity countermanding his own fragility:

> The cherub, sitting perkily upright on its knees, forms a handle for the lid on an antique ornamental bronze bowl which occupies the end of a mantelpiece and generally goes unadmired…. The lid fits the bowl with a precision that utterly satisfies… of all the things in his grandmother's house, his favorite is this cocky angel on a bowl…[34]

The bronze cherub is arguably a fetishized item; it is a concrete, permanent fixing of identity expressive, not of the Law of the Father, but of the mother/child bond implicated and validated in the phrase 'the lid fits the bowl with a precision'. The link between the bronze cherub and the mother is further reinforced when Adrian takes it with him when he finally decides to run away to look for her.

Adrian's relationship with his grandmother Beattie, an 'other' who could be a potentially satisfying 'substitute object' for his mother, is, from Adrian's perspective, not one that nurtures his self-esteem but rather adds to his dread of being unloved and unwanted. Beattie cannot deliver on Adrian's expectation because as the narrative makes clear, she is tortured by her own sense of inadequacy as a mother and her inability to influence her children's lives beyond their childhood with her. Like the three missing Metford children, Beattie's three, Sookie, Martha and Rory are 'beyond her reach and adult now.'[35] Irigaray claims that the mother as woman is diminished in a Western phallocentric social and representational order that limits her autonomy and her identity as a woman and a sexual being. There must, Irigaray urges, be a space for the mother as woman within the Symbolic Order to countermand the Freudian construction of woman as mother.[36] *Of A Boy* gestures towards the recuperation of the mother as woman in its switch from Adrian's to Beattie's perspective for periodic segments of the narrative. These digressive turns enable us to weigh Adrian's need of mothering against the disappointments and frustrations of Beattie's experience of it, thus counterbalancing the fantasy of the good mother with the fact of 'real' mothers (and in this case grandmothers). We learn for instance that while she expresses a strong sense of responsibility towards Adrian, Beattie feels she is not capable of loving him as if he were her own. Moreover his presence has greatly reduced her capacity for her own self-development and individuation beyond the responsibilities of family life. She says to Rory and Martha:

‘“he rules my days. I can’t go anywhere…I’ve got to be here every three-thirty, collecting him from school. I get a holiday when he does. I’ve got to cook decent meals for him each night, so he doesn’t waste away. He needs cleaning, clothing, carting here and there. It’s hard work rearing a child. It’s not work for the old.”’ [37] Adrian arrives at his grandmother’s house ‘needy as a chick, remaining to hang like shackles from her arms’ shortly after Beattie has recovered from the death of her husband.[38] Beattie’s metaphor (Adrian as the ‘needy chick’) excites a social discourse of mothering in which the mother is ‘naturally’ seen to be the primary caregiver. Beattie is also shackled by another ‘boy’ – her 25year old son Rory who is housebound and emotionally paralysed after an accident in which the car he was recklessly driving resulted in the ‘living death’ of his friend David and his own ‘living’ death. Rory is potentially another ‘substitute’ mother figure for Adrian, but his promise to Adrian that he will always look after him is undermined by his incapacity to step beyond the fragile world he also inhabits. Rory’s sense of vulnerability and abjectness echoes Adrian’s:

> No-one knows about this abattoir within his body – or maybe his mother does. No one except Beattie knows that Rory needs to stay indoors watching the world through a window because, when he steps outdoors, the meat hanging on his ribs swings and sorrows with the wind. [39]

This externalized image of Rory’s emotional floundering echoes the earlier description of Adrian’s sea-monster, while Rory’s painting of it which he gives to Adrian further augments the alliance between Rory and Adrian. In a textual and psychological sense they occupy the same borderline state.

The deject, Kristeva argues, is a ‘stray’, a ‘deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines - for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject - constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.’ [40] This constant search for a stable space characterizes the hapless, homeless Adrian and his attempts to find in the material world, the psychological and physical correlative to the ‘warm place to lie’ that he hopes the Metford children have found. [41] The family and home of his best friend Clinton Tull provide him with the possibility of another substitute for self-completion. Adrian’s love of the Tull’s house, which is described as ‘cluttered like Christmas tree, where the heating and the television are always turned up high’ is a strong contrast to the dull and uninviting darkness of his grandmother’s house. Clinton’s massive mother – ‘her husband never does anything without asking her first…he exists in the house unobtrusively a tiny spider sharing the web of a giant’ – is the focal point of Adrian’s attraction to this site/sight of maternal plenitude. Hartnett’s descriptions of Clinton’s mother and her family buttress this seductive view; she is described as someone who ‘adores her children… her days revolve around them; she seems to float without purpose like a gaudy balloon when they step out from her expansive shadow.’ [42] The dualistic edge to Hartnett’s depiction of this phallic mother (see Irigaray) however, allows us to contextualize Adrian’s cherishing of her and as well to frame her sympathetically within a social order that predicates the mother’s value on the wants and needs of the child. Despite her large, solid physical presence, she has no identity beyond being there for her children as the description, ‘floats without

purpose like a gaudy balloon when they step out from her expansive shadow' indicates. Incidents briefly alluded to in the narrative reveal that Clinton has embraced his oedipal status: he asserts his phallic power over Adrian by destroying Adrian's beloved slinky [43] and he abjures his mother who is an embarrassment to him, thus negating her value and further reducing her subjective agency. Despite Clinton's denigration of his mother, which in many ways echoes Adrian's father's negation of Sookie, Clinton's mother refuses to castigate her son for his actions and attitudes.

Once the prospect of Clinton's mother and family recedes as a site of self-completion for Adrian, he 'territorializes' other spaces where the mother figure again features as a sustaining fantasy who might guarantee wholeness. He befriends three children who have moved into the house across the street from his grandmother's – Nicole, the oldest, with whom he forms a special, if brittle and fatal friendship, Joely and Giles. Like the missing Metford children, these children are also 'missing' their mother; she is dying of an unspecified illness in the front bedroom of the house, a situation which prompts Nicole to complain "'she shouldn't be anyone's mother, if all she does is lie in bed all day and die'". [44] Nicole too is another lost and insecure child who, because of her father's attention to the dying mother, also seeks mother substitutes. At times she takes on the mother/nurturer role to her siblings and to Adrian, echoed in her grief over a young bird which has fallen out of its nest and which she tries to save. So intense is her desire for love and connection, she even proposes that she and her siblings could be the missing Metford children. Nicole's mother asks one day to meet Adrian, an encounter which is couched as an intimate moment of connection invoking the absent body of the mother, the Imaginary mother of the pre-Oedipal period, insubstantial yet desired:

> Her feet, snowed in under the blankets, make only the slightest bulge. Her hands are white and fragile as flour. Although she is not gaunt, she hardly dents her pillow……
> "It was nice meeting you," he says, and he means it, though he never wants to return. Part of him understands why Nicole would claim to have lost her mother; another part thinks that, were this lady his own mother, he could never bear to leave her side. [45]

The mother who cannot care for her children, who fails to nurture and protect them is a recurrent motif in the novel, but it is not held out as an accusation. On the contrary, the 'failure' of mothering in the text reveals the pressure on women to meet the oppressive social expectations of the 'good' mother as enunciated in the Symbolic script of domestic and suburban bliss. Hartnett's references to the missing Metford children flesh out this concept. The day the children walk to the shops and are never heard of again is cast in the warm and seductive romanticised version of suburban safeness, as the 'good' mother waves goodbye to her children. They are never seen again, and the spectre of the 'thin man', who is seen in close proximity to them and who may have, like a sinister Pied Piper figure spirited them away, suggests the vulnerability of the child's world and its connection to a failure of 'proper' mothering. [46] The mother figure, as the narrative suggests, is one who, by social imperatives is both seen to be and sees herself as solely responsible for the children's safety, part of what Kaplan calls the 'sentimental mother discourse' which 'portrays a mother who is absorbed in nurturing'. [47] This is reflected in the depiction of the various mother figures that are connected, however peripherally, with

the missing Metford children. These include the Metford children's distraught and guilt-ridden mother who pleads for the return of her children unharmed; Beattie's disturbed neighbor Mrs. Jeremio who mistakes Nicole, Adrian and Joely for the missing children and tries to rescue them; and an unnamed 'housewife' who tries to kill herself because, as the second person to witness the missing children on their way to the shop, feels responsible for their unimaginable/imaginable fate. All of these mother figures, including Beattie, feel that they have failed to be the good mother as identified in prevailing social discourses because they 'could not protect their children from harm.'[48] Adrian's own mother Sookie is given very little narrative space and is only re-presented through others who see her in reductive ways; she too is a failed mother in the terms set out by the Symbolic. Adrian's father has declared her unfit to mother; Beattie is troubled by her daughter's careless mothering and is estranged from her; and Martha, her ambitious sister, is angry that Sookie's failure to mother properly might mean she could be recruited to inherit the responsibility of parenting Adrian should Beattie be unable to. Again Hartnett's brief references to Sookie enable us to see the ways in which she is cast in the Symbolic Order by others as not a 'clean and proper' [49]mother, an image that also clearly governs Nicole's judgement of her mother as ineffectual because she is sick. To Adrian, however, his mother exists in memory as someone he 'adored' and who, despite her faults, 'never made him feel unbeloved'. [50] The choice of words here confers partial subjectivity on the mother invoking Winnicott's notion of the 'good enough' mother, at the same time as it conjures what Benjamin calls the 'fantasy that the other could perfectly meet our wishes'. [51]

The narrative begins with the Metford children leaving the family home and their mother, and it concludes with Adrian leaving Beattie's home to try to find his. In this respect Hartnett's text animates the spectre of the 'untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother' [52] as that which marks Adrian's yearning for wholeness: He 'doesn't believe that seeing him would upset her: rather he thinks it would make her happy'. [53] These book-end journeys are symmetrically engaged at the end of the text and contribute to a reading of the narrative as a defiance of the Oedipal script, its harsh and often unrealizable imperatives for mothers and children. Thus the journey back to the mother is an acknowledgment of the significance of the Semiotic or pre-Oedipal where the mother is not held to ransom by the demands of the Symbolic Order. Hartnett's novel again echoes Kristeva's script for the deject who is 'on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart'. [54] Adrian takes the 'risk' to find his mother, but his bid is hijacked by Nicole's declaration that she knows where the lost Metford children are, and that finding them might provide them with the attention and caring they crave. Inspired by a news report that featured a clairvoyant claiming the children were near water, Nicole leads Adrian to the local swimming pools that have been covered for the winter. Climbing the fence and dancing on top of the tarpaulin on the largest pool, Nicole loses her footing and slips between the edge of the pool and the taut membranous cover. Adrian dives in to find her, weighed down by his beloved bronze cherub, and they both drown. Hartnett's description of Adrian's last moments in the water under the swimming pool cover reads like a description of the child in the womb, rotating in the amniotic sac:

> His feet, kicking, touch nothing. His hands, outstretched, touch nothing. His blunt fingernails do not find rope. The cover of the pool seals the line between the water and oxygen. He butts against it, but it does not lift….Later, the cover will wrap him like a skin. He'll float in still liquid like something not yet born, like something only waiting to be born again and begin. [55]

Adrian is 'born again' in narrative time in the poetically-charged genotext[56] which concludes the novel and which celebrates the mother-child union/ re-union. Images of nature and the cosmos– the earth, the stars, the sun – are interlaced with figurations of the semiotic and maternal space in which the various sets of lost and missing children registered throughout the narrative are merged as one with the imaginary mother.

> Where we are, we can hear birds,
> Where we are we can see stars….
> Here, as always we hold each other's hands….
> Where we are, morning wipes us clean
> We hear Mother speak our names.
>
> We are here: *here*
> Where we are, winter grass is growing,
> Where we are, we feel the sun. [57]

This poetic addendum acts as an anodyne to the fear and loathing generated in the child during the separation drama as Kristeva describes it in *Powers of Horror*: 'Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their object, that is, from their representations, out of such a daze, he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up –fear'. [58] The use of poetry at this point in the narrative to express a return to the womb and a reunion with the mother is particularly appropriate. Kristeva claims that poetry, with its non-linear manouvres, its rhythms and pulsions approximates the pre-signifying chora and is therefore a potent conduit to the semiotic.

Conclusion

Feminist interrogation of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of subject formation has identified the moment of separation of the child from the mother as one in which the body of the mother is made abject by the intervention of the father. As a potent force, the mother threatens the possibility of the child acquiring a unified and separate identity. These approaches contend that because there is so much value placed on the importance of the oedipal stage and the significance of the father/phallus in ensuring self-hood, there is a concomitant diminishing of the mother in the pre-Oedipal period which translates to her invisibility in the Symbolic. This unwelcome intrusion of the father and the repudiation of the mother is literalised in the narrative when Adrian's father, representing 'authority' takes him away from his mother consigning both Adrian's mother and Adrian to a devalued subject position. Through Adrian's emotional allegiance to his mother which is one that firms his resolve to find her, and through Harnett's poetic

intervention in the conclusion to the novel, the text can be read as a valorisation of the pre-oedipal and the mother-child dyad where both children and mothers are given voice and agency, what Benjamin calls a 'pre-verbal alternative to Lacan's linguistic notion of the symbolic' [59] – 'we hear Mother speak our names'.[60]

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[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
[2] Kristeva, 1982, p.8.
[3] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama.* London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p.43.
[4] Sonya Hartnett is an Australian writer who has published children's, young adult and adult fiction. She has won many literary awards and nominations for her work including the Guardian Award (UK) in 2002 for *Thursday's Child*. Her *oeuvre* includes *Sleeping Dogs*, *The Silver Donkey*, *Wilful Blue* and *Surrender*. Just this year she won the acclaimed Astrid Lindgren Memorial award for writing that captures the spirit of Lindgren's tales. Hartnett's work is considerably darker in its concerns; she describes herself as a troublemaker and her novels deal with confronting and disturbing material, often with a touch of the Gothic.
[5] Kristeva's conceptualisation of the abject as a psycho-social state in *Powers of Horror* has spawned very productive readings of literary texts. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs for example draws on the abject to analyse a number of narratives, among them Hartnett's *Thursday's Child,* in her article 'Borderland Children: Reflections on Narratives of Abjection.' *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30.3, 2006, pp. 316-336.
[6] Sonya Hartnett, *Of A Boy*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2002, p.5.
[7] Hartnett has recently admitted that the missing children motif for her novel was not based on the actual disappearance of the Beaumont children in Adelaide in 1966. However once she recognized the similarity she built on some of the details from the Beaumont case including various sightings of the children, the use of the clairvoyant and the description of a thin man who was seen with the children on the day of their disappearance.
[8] Hartnett, p.155.
[9] Jean Duruz, 'Suburban Gardens: Cultural Notes.' *Beasts of Suburbia*. Eds. S. Ferber, C. Healy, C. McAuliffe. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994, p.203.
[10] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Routledge, 1988, p.99.
[11] Fuery and Mansfield (in *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.126) comment that 'the *semiotique*, on the other hand, operates outside of (perhaps beneath is a better metaphor) this symbolic order. If the symbolic is structured, ordered and directed towards communication, the *semiotique* is unstructured, free-flowing, and chaotic. It opposes the symbolic, and continually tries to disrupt it. In this way it parallels the operation of the unconscious'.

[12] Julia Kristeva , 'Revolution in Poetic Language.' *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p.93.
[13] Kristeva, 1982, p.64.
[14] Hartnett, p.111.
[15] "This law is what Lacan famously dubs the name (nom) of the father, trading on a felicitous homonymy in French between nom (name) and non (the 'no!' to incestuous union). When the father intervenes, (at least when he is what Lacan calls the symbolic father) Lacan's argument is that he does so less as a living enjoying individual than as the delegate and spokesperson of a body of social Law and convention that is also recognised by the mother, as a socialised being, to be decisive."
(www.iep.utm.edu/i/lacweb.htm International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis)
[16] Hartnett, p. 156.
[17] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities.' *Sexuality and Space*. Ed. Beatriz Colomina. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
[18] Hartnett, p.133.
[19] Kristeva, 1982, p.8.
[20] Hartnett, p.9.
[21] Hartnett, p.8.
[22] Moi, p.100.
[23] Kristeva, 1982, p.8.
[24] Hartnett, p.42.
[25] Hartnett, p.29.
[26] Hartnett, p.19.
[27] While it is not within the purview of this article to consider the ways in which the lost children motif in Hartnett's novel resonates with the stolen (read 'lost') generation of indigenous Australian children, it is a reading that is sustainable, and that can be linked with one of Peter Pierce's central arguments in his book *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press,1999). He writes that … "the lost child is the symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler community of this country" (xi).
[28] Hartnett, p.17.
[29] This characterisation is similar to that of the character Tin in *Thursday's Child*.
[30] Hartnett, p.102.
[31] Hartnett, pp. 34, 28.
[32] Sophia Phoca and Rebecca Wright, *Introducing Postfeminism*. Ed. Richard Appignanesi, Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999, pp.42-43.
[33] Comments quoted from J. Lye from Brock University who provides a taxonomy of Psychoanalytic Theory: Terms and Concepts on the Department of English website at http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/terms.htm
[34] Hartnett, p.31.
[35] Hartnett, p.67.
[36] cited in Elizabeth Grosz , *Sexual Subversions*. Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1989, p.119.
[37] Hartnett, p.150.
[38] Hartnett, p. 66.
[39] Hartnett, p.38.

[40] Kristeva, 1982, p.8.
[41] Hartnett, p.134.
[42] Hartnett, p.119.
[43] The slinky is a toy that Adrian's grandmother allows him to purchase. Its form echoes Adrian's vulnerability and malleability, but also his connection with the maternal/feminine semiotic. Clinton's destruction of this toy signals the power of the Symbolic order and its devaluing of the feminine.
[44] Hartnett, p.136.
[45] Hartnett, p.110.
[46] The 'thin man' could be read in many ways, and from Adrian's perspective he is both a threat and a possible source of comfort, and even ironically a maternal figure because he is a desiring 'other' who could complete him. This is echoed in Adrian's reflection that he 'has never thought that an ordinary child could be worth taking or wanting, a desirable thing' (p.29). The story of the thin man abducting the children also resonates to some degree with the tale of the Pied Piper. Adrian is the lost child because he has been left behind by the Piper, and earnestly desires to be 'taken'.
[47] E. Ann Kaplan, p.209.
[48] Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, Eds *'Bad' mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America*. London and New York: NYU Press, 1998, p.3.
[49] Kristeva, 1982, p.102.
[50] Hartnett, p.93.
[51] Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays On Recognition And Sexual Difference*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995: p.91.
[52] Kristeva, 1982, p.6.
[53] Hartnett, p.95.
[54] Kristeva, 1982, p.8.
[55] Hartnett, p.184.
[56] Kelly Oliver explains that Kristeva's term 'genotext' refers to the " text of the drives as they are constituted by the social code and yet show up within that code. It is a return of the repressed in language" (pp. 98-99) in Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: unravelling the double-bind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
[57] Hartnett, p.188.
[58] Kristeva, 1982, p.6.
[59] Benjamin, 1995, p.95.
[60] This is also a narrative move that can be criticized because it does not necessarily liberate 'real' mothers from the projected fantasy of maternal plenitude and its discomforting similarity with the Oedipal story of the good and proper mother. Neither does it liberate the child from the overwhelming dependence on the mother, nor validate the mother as subject separate from the child. According to Pam Morris, (in *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*) Kristeva claims that a 'desire to return to the mother can become a desire for loss of identity, for a dissolution of self in m/other – for death' (1993, p.148); and this is precisely where Adrian's journey leads him. Michelle Walker (*Philosophy and the Maternal Body: reading silence*, 1998) asserts that theories which reify the pre-oedipal mother and the mother-child bond of the pre-oedipal period run the

risk of being similar to the very phallocentric theories they attack, in that they affirm the woman as mother but elide the mother as woman.